

National Endowment for the Arts



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS



**THE BIG
READ**

**“You don’t have to
burn books to
destroy a culture.
Just get people to
stop reading them.”**

—Ray Bradbury

Fahrenheit 451

CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION



Photo by Vance Jacobs

The Big Read is a major initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to revitalize the role of reading in American public culture. The program brings the transformative power of literature into the lives of all citizens to unite communities through reading.

In 2004 the NEA report *Reading at Risk* identified a critical decline in reading among American adults. The Big Read aims to address this issue directly by providing citizens with the opportunity to read and discuss a single book within their communities.

By embarking on the Big Read, you join your fellow citizens in the ambitious enterprise of restoring reading to its rightful place at the heart of American life. The purpose of the Big Read, like the purpose of literature itself, is pleasure—not necessarily an easy pleasure, but a deliciously rich and complex one. A great book enlightens and enchants. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can even offer harrowing insights that mysteriously manage to console and comfort us.

The prospect of an America where only a few people share a love of reading is just too sad to bear. Even if statistics didn't show that readers are more active in their own communities and more engaged in their own lives, the act of reading would still be an indispensable part of what makes us fully human. Both for these reasons and to preserve the invaluable legacy of our nation's literature, we at the National Endowment for the Arts invite you to join the Big Read.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dana Gioia". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

A REASON FOR THE BIG READ

Drawn from a study by the Census Bureau in 2002, *Reading at Risk* establishes a disheartening fact: *literary reading* (see sidebar) is rapidly declining among American adults. The drop registers with all categories: age, race, gender, and level of education. With a survey sampling of 17,000 Americans, this report is one of the most comprehensive polls of reading habits ever taken. Key findings are:

Less than half (46.7%) of the American adult population now reads literature.

The ten-year rate of decline in literary reading has accelerated from -5% to -14% since 1992.

All book reading, regardless of genre, has declined by -7% over the past decade.

Literary reading is declining among all education levels.

The rate of college graduates reading literature has decreased by -15.4% since 1982.

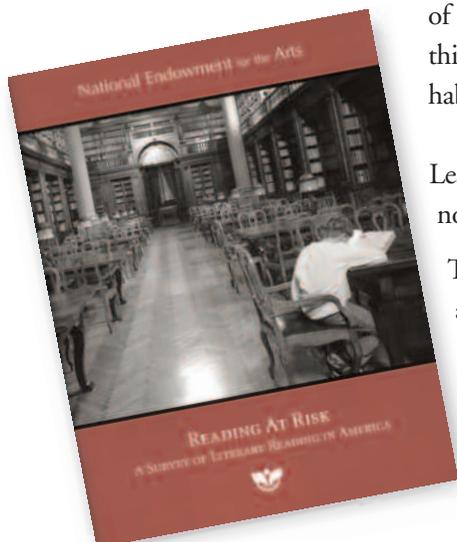
Literary reading is declining among all age groups.

The steepest decline, at -28%, occurs among 18-24 year-olds, the youngest age group surveyed.

Just over one-third of men (37.6%) now read literature.

More than half of all women (55.1%) still read literature, but that rate has declined -7.9% since 1982.

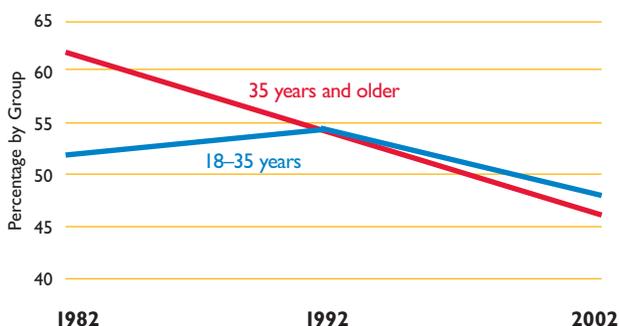
Literary readers are more likely to perform volunteer and charity work (43%) than are non-literary readers (17%).



Reading at Risk defines literary reading as novels, short stories, poetry, or drama, in any format including the Internet. Everything from romance novels to classical verse counted.

For a complete *Reading at Risk* report, download a PDF of the report at www.arts.gov/publ/ReadingAtRisk.pdf.

Literary Reading by Young Adults, 1982–2002



THE BIG READ BASICS

The Big Read will become the biggest book club in U.S. history. After *Reading at Risk* galvanized a national discussion on the decline in reading in America, the idea for the Big Read took shape as a partial solution to this growing problem. To create this program, the National Endowment for the Arts studied both the successes and struggles of city reads initiatives across the country. The Arts Endowment, with its partners the Institute of Museum and Library Services and Arts Midwest, put together a plan that focused on the best practices for a sustainable city reads program. Next, the Arts Endowment provided the funding and materials necessary for its success. The Big Read program requires wide cooperation, bright ideas, deep roots, and tough questions. The Big Read aims to strengthen communities by getting people to read and discuss the dilemmas, conflicts, and hopes in great books. The Big Read is designed to help build a nation of active readers and thinkers.

- In communities across the country, the Big Read gives citizens the opportunity to read and discuss a single book.
- In each city or town, the Arts Endowment creates community partnerships with libraries, local government officials, arts organizations, media, publishers, booksellers, arts organizations, schools, colleges, and other interested groups—combining the public and private sectors to reach the entire community.
- Each selected city or town develops its own program of activities related to its chosen novel in collaboration with its community partners.
- The Big Read includes an extensive communications plan, using television, radio, Internet, and print outlets.
- In schools throughout each city, the Arts Endowment provides materials—teacher’s guides, audio guides, and reader’s guides specific to each novel—and guidance to teachers interested in incorporating the selected book into their classes.



A panel on race relations was part of South Dakota's program on To Kill a Mockingbird.
Photo by Jayne Erickson

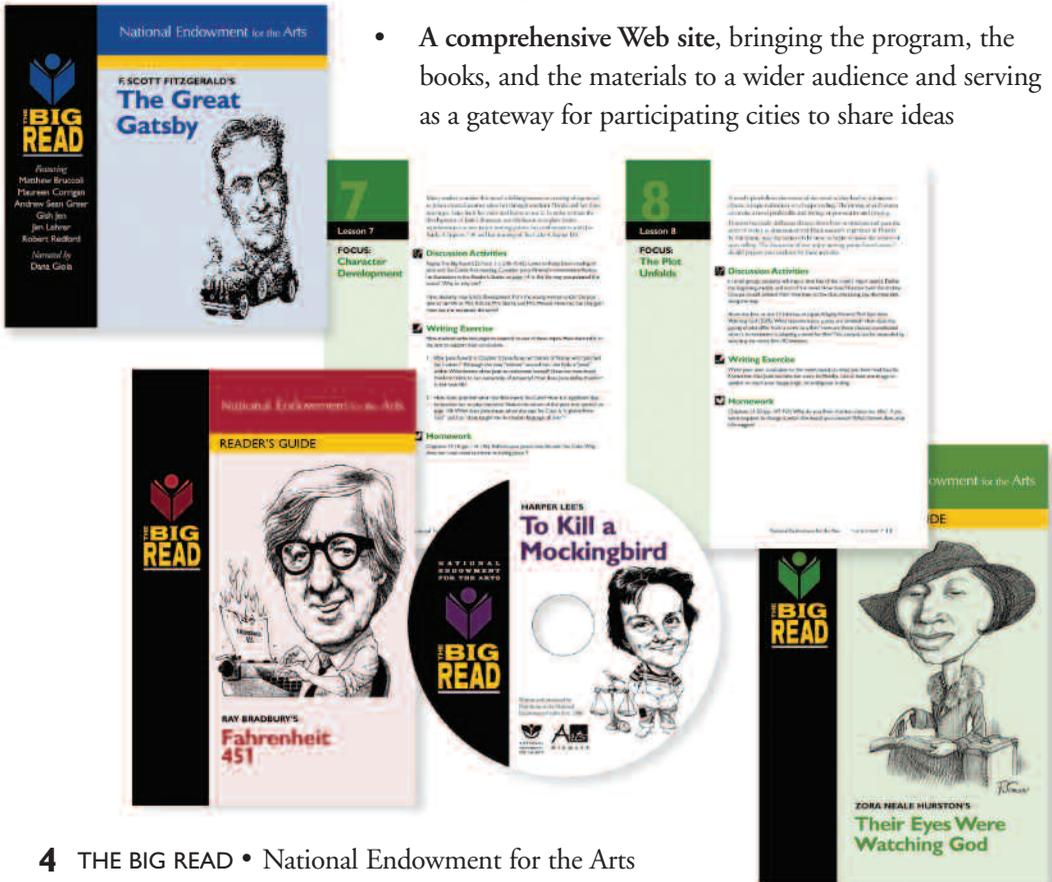
THE BIG READ LIBRARY

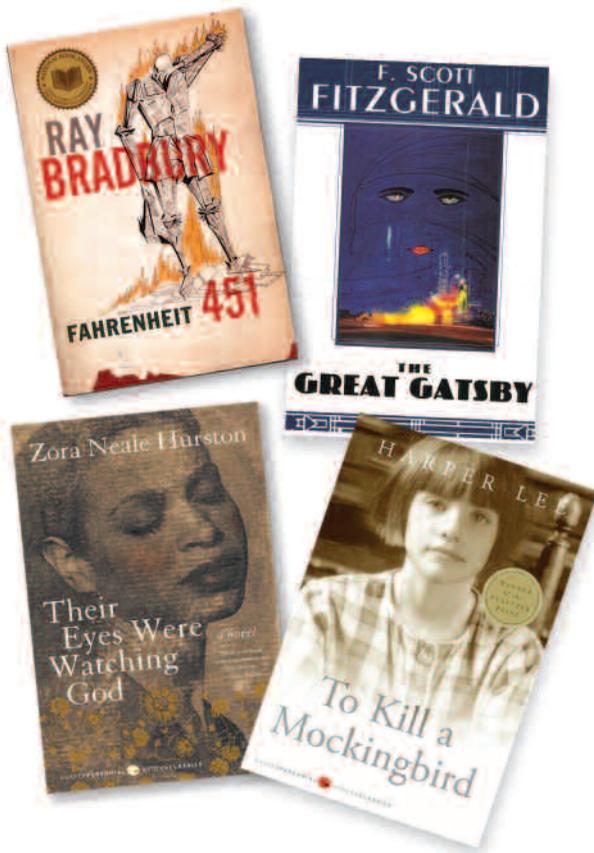
In addition to a direct grant to each chosen community, the National Endowment for the Arts is creating a library of related materials for each community's use to entice readers to join the Big Read.

These materials include:

- **Reader's guides** for each book, providing historical context, author biographies, discussion questions, and more
- **Teacher's guides** for each novel, with ten days of lesson plans, including writing assignments, discussion questions, and handouts
- **CDs** for each book, with commentary from renowned artists, educators, and public figures
- **TV spots**, as part of a comprehensive media plan
- **Radio programming**, also part of the media plan
- **Publicity materials**, including posters, banners, and bookmarks
- **An online organizer's guide** for running a successful Big Read program
- **A comprehensive Web site**, bringing the program, the books, and the materials to a wider audience and serving as a gateway for participating cities to share ideas

Audio guides, reader's guides, and teacher's guides are part of The Big Read.





THE BIG READ PILOT PHASE

In its first year, the Big Read debuted in ten cities and counties across the United States. With the goal of uniting communities through great literature, the Big Read brought the joy of reading to a variety of readers from the Northwest to South Florida.

- The largest community, Miami, served a total population of 4 million with programming in both Miami-Dade and Broward counties in South Florida.
- The smallest community, Enterprise, Oregon, reached a total population of 7,000 in Oregon's Wallowa Valley.
- All ten communities created partnerships with schools, local government officials, and the private sector.
- Communities built programs with events, venues, and materials unique for their region. Miami received a Spanish version of the *Fahrenheit 451* reader's guide, and Topeka held events at its *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site.

BOOKS FOR THE BIG READ PILOT CITIES

Ten libraries, literary centers, and Centers for the Book chose one of four books to bring the Big Read to their communities in 2006.

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Huntsville, Alabama
Huntsville-Madison County Public Library

Little Rock, Arkansas
Arkansas Center for the Book

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

Topeka, Kansas
Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library

Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota
The Loft Literary Center

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

Fresno, California
Fresno County Library
Sioux Falls, South Dakota
South Dakota Center for the Book

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury

Miami, Florida
Florida Center for the Literary Arts & Florida Center for the Book

Boise, Idaho
Log Cabin Literary Center
Buffalo, New York
Just Buffalo Literary Center
Enterprise, Oregon
Fishtrap, Inc.



Representatives from the 10 pilot cities attend an orientation session in Washington, DC, December 2005.
Photo by David Low

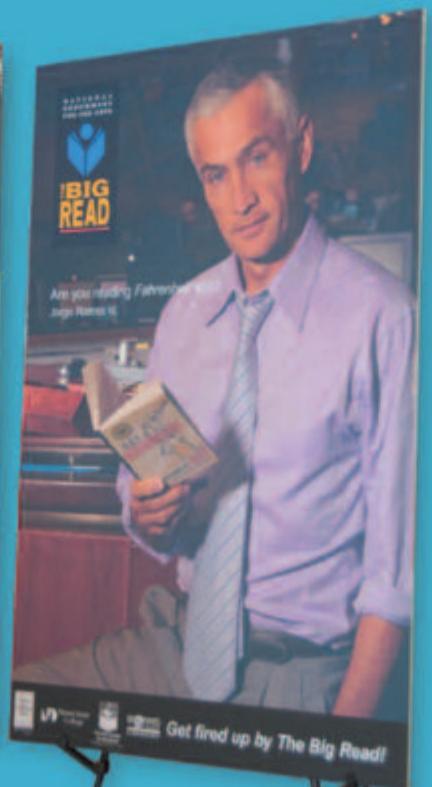
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Since no two communities are alike, the Big Read activities are unique to each area. Here are a few events and programs from the first year of the program that are fresh, innovative, and emblematic of the Big Read's goals.

In honor of *The Great Gatsby*, the Antique Automobile Club of America in **Huntsville, Alabama**, sponsored a period car show featuring cars from the 1920s.

In **Little Rock**, the Arkansas statewide program serialized large segments of *The Great Gatsby* in many local newspapers, reaching readers in rural areas. The Arkansas Center for the Book also distributed 1,000 copies of the novel to schools and discussion groups across the state.

Famous Floridians Javier Romero and Jorge Ramos get into the act or reading.
Photo by Phil Roche



I G H T S

The Fresno County Library in California sponsored a 24-hour celebrity read-a-thon in conjunction with a local Krispy Kreme as part of its programming for *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

For *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis hosted “Equilibrium’s Spoken Word at the Loft: A Harlem Renaissance Tribute” — a show featuring nationally known and emerging spoken-word artists.



South Dakotans attend a dramatic reading of the trial in To Kill a Mockingbird.
Photo by Jayne Erickson

Miami-Dade Community College students pose as firemen and read Fahrenheit 451.
Photo by Phil Roche



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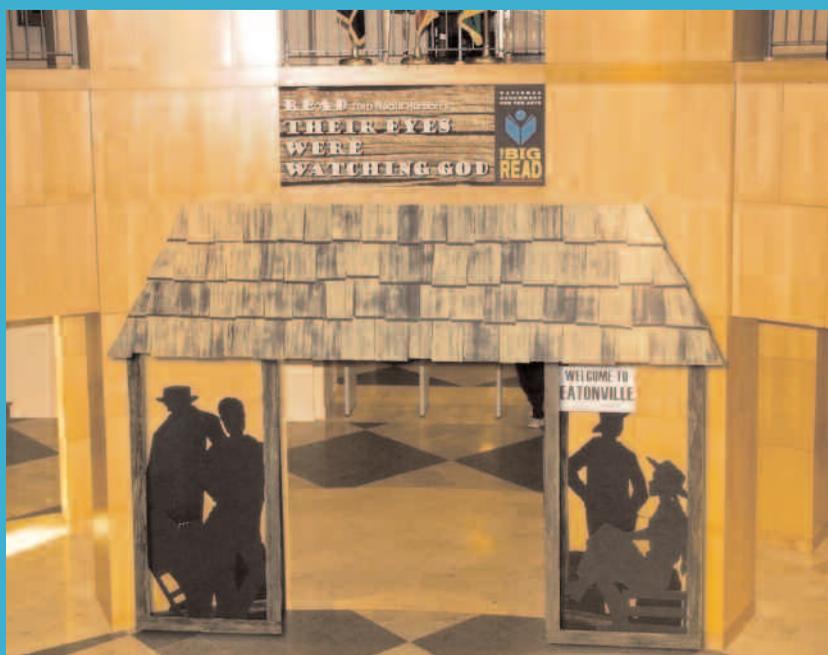
“Scout” appears in her Halloween costume, in the Sioux Falls St. Patrick’s Day Parade.

Photo by Susannah Bielak

Author Ray Bradbury appeared via videoconference for a session on *Fahrenheit 451* in **South Florida**. *60 Minutes* correspondent Ed Bradley hosted the event.

Sioux Falls, South Dakota, had a Big Read caravan for its St. Patrick’s Day parade. Highlights included the character “Scout” in her papier-mâché ham costume and Harper Lee biographer Charles J. Shields, each in their own convertibles.

An exhibit at **Boise’s** hands-on science museum, The Discovery Center, displayed technology prefigured in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, so children could explore the relationship between technological advances and culture.



*The Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library transformed its entryway into the storefront from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.*

Photo by James Hebert

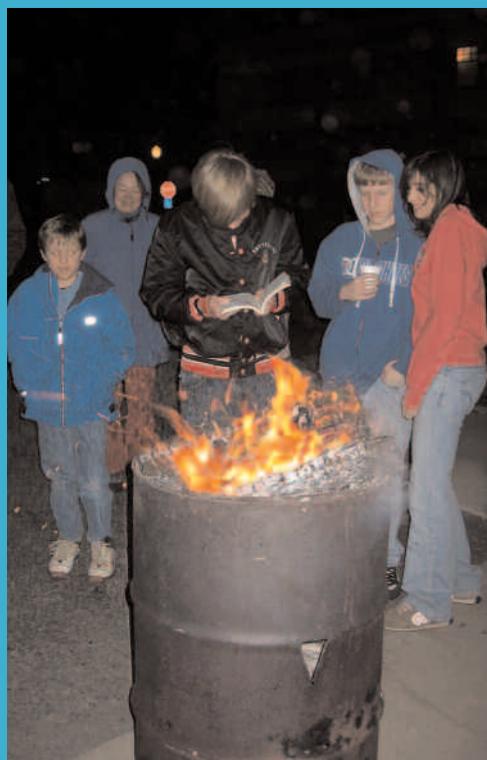
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Kansas University chancellor and pioneering Zora Neale Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway joined Hurston's niece Lucy Anne Hurston for a symposium in **Topeka, Kansas**, on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

In **Enterprise, Oregon**, local schools celebrated a "Turn off your TV" week, inviting students and members of the community to read *Fahrenheit 451* together. The week concluded with a town-wide bonfire where no books were burned.

Students from Enterprise, Oregon, read aloud from their favorite books before a non-book-burning bonfire tribute to Fahrenheit 451.

Photo by Amy Stolls



A courtroom scene from To Kill a Mockingbird, dramatized in the Sioux Falls program. "Atticus" above; "Jem" and "Scout," right.

Photos by Jayne Erickson



WHICH BOOKS?

No factor is more important to the success of the Big Read than which books are featured. For the pilot phase, the selected books were all modern American classics. Each had been successfully used in city reads programs and book clubs across the country.

Among the first four books of the program,

- One received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (*To Kill a Mockingbird*)
- One was written by a National Medal of Arts recipient (*Fahrenheit 451*)
- One is considered a masterpiece of the Jazz Age and the Lost Generation (*The Great Gatsby*)
- And the last is a cornerstone of African-American literature (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*)
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Fahrenheit 451* have been the most frequently selected books by city reads programs across the United States.*

*According to the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress



THE READERS CIRCLE

For the next phase of the program, a distinguished group of artists, authors, critics, educators, and librarians will form a Readers Circle to develop a more comprehensive list of books. Some charter members of this group are:

Wendell Berry, poet and novelist

James Billington, Librarian of Congress

Harold Bloom, scholar and author

James Lee Burke, author

Lan Samantha (Sam) Chang, author and professor

Maureen Corrigan, author and book critic

Michael Dirda, book critic

Anne Fadiman, author and essayist

Pico Iyer, journalist and novelist

Mitchell Kaplan, former American Booksellers Association President

Ted Kooser, United States Poet Laureate

Jim Lehrer, journalist and author

Jonathan Lethem, author

Aimee Mann, musician

Lorrie Moore, author

Azar Nafisi, author and professor

Marilyn Nelson, Connecticut state poet laureate

Kathleen Norris, author

P.J. O'Rourke, essayist and humorist

Nancy Pearl, author and librarian

Richard Rodriguez, author

Kevin Starr, historian and former California state librarian



THE FUTURE OF THE BIG READ

The Big Read will expand to 100 communities in all 50 states in 2007. Communities will choose from an ever-expanding list of books, with a new book available each month.

Twelve books will be available for the next phase, including:

Ray Bradbury	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i>
Willa Cather	<i>My Ántonia</i>
F. Scott Fitzgerald	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>
Ernest Hemingway	<i>A Farewell to Arms</i>
Zora Neale Hurston	<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>
Harper Lee	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>
John Steinbeck	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>
Amy Tan	<i>The Joy Luck Club</i>

“All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you; the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was.”

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY



The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation’s largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.



The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation’s 122,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. Its mission is to grow and sustain a “Nation of Learners” because life-long learning is essential to a democratic society and individual success. Through its grant making, convenings, research and publications, the Institute empowers museums and libraries nationwide to provide leadership and services to enhance learning in families and communities, sustain cultural heritage, build twenty-first-century skills, and increase civic participation.



Arts Midwest connects people throughout the Midwest and the world to meaningful arts opportunities, sharing creativity, knowledge, and understanding across boundaries. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest’s history spans more than 25 years.

Book Cover Credits

Fahrenheit 451 book cover, used with permission of Del Rey/The Random House Ballantine Publishing Group; *The Great Gatsby* book cover, cover painting by Francis Cugat, used courtesy of Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group; *To Kill a Mockingbird* book cover, photograph by John Montgomery, courtesy of HarperCollins; *Their Eyes Were Watching God* book cover, photograph by Brad Wilson/Photonica, courtesy of HarperCollins.

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A Great Nation Deserves Great Art.

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The Big Read is an initiative designed to revitalize the role of literature in American society. Created by the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and Arts Midwest, this program aims to bring the transformative power of reading into the lives of Americans. The Big Read will work with multiple partners across the country to encourage citizens to read for pleasure and enlightenment.

www.NEABigRead.org